

# We have built a block of 360 flats<sup>1</sup> in Marseille – a box of homes.

The housing shortage in France is so acute as to demand the construction of four million dwellings in the next ten years.

During the occupation I didn't do so much as one square inch of planning. With all the devastation – houses, farms, indeed whole towns – there was plenty to be done. But I wasn't asked to. Not a house, not a church, not a town hall or a museum. Nothing. I was in bad odour. In 1941 I published *Sur les 4 routes*, in 1942 *la Maison des hommes, la Charte d'Athènes* and *Entretiens avec les étudiants d'architecture*. The allied armies were already pressing on Berlin when our first Minister of Reconstruction asked me:

"What town are you working on?"

"None whatever."

"What building are you doing?"

"None whatever."

"In that case (with a slightly quizzical smile) would you like to do... one of your... omnibus houses... for ten people down in Marseille?"

<sup>1</sup> The word is used somewhat loosely here. The *appartement* of the Marseilles Block is something between a flat and a maisonnette.

"By all means. On one condition. I must be free of all building regulations in force."

"Right."

We worked from 1945 to 1950 to create a prototype, which was to be the forerunner of – of all sorts of things. We formed a team of experts, and quite a large one, who searched and studied, who rummaged and explored. For the creation of a prototype is a long-term adventure. All sorts of obstacles were thrown across our path, but we plodded on. Through ten successive governments, working with seven different Ministers of Reconstruction. Each change of government threatened to bring our work to an end. Each time, however, the incoming Minister gave us his help. We needed it, for there were those who sought to set the country against us. Who were they?

présidé à d'inquiétants aligne- (voir suite page 2)

tant le piocrene — période au se lui en fournissent graduelle- d'un cours de laquelle d're couches ment les moyens. D'abord il xiém rudimentaire de sable de 200 à construit des moulins à vent.

## PROTESTATION de la totalité, moins un des architectes du Morbihan sur les dispositions de l'unité d'habitation projetée pour Marseille

Une importante publicité annonce la construction à MARSEILLE de l'unité d'habitation de : **LE CORBUSIER** intitulée : **"LA MAISON RADIEUSE"**

**Exposé du projet**

**U**NE forte densité de pro-  
prieté et des espaces vert.  
importants.  
La « Maison Radieuse »

comme les tiroirs dans une com-  
mode.  
Les appartements possèdent  
tous des loggias.  
L'ensemble élevé sur pilotis  
comprend : des services communs  
et des appartements individuels.

A mi-bauteur de l'immeuble.  
Un magasin de ravitaillement.  
Une galerie commerciale, avec  
poste auxiliaire, tabac, journaux,  
magasins, petit hôtel et restau-  
rant.

(1) le phi du nui

The first salvo. . . Cutting from *La Journée du Batiment*

One campaign followed another. I read the first article to appear in the papers. What a headline! "Protest by all but one of the architects of the Morbihan against the project for a... etc. etc." After that I decided not to read another line about the Marseille Block. I have kept my word, leaving it to the poisonous little scribes to read their own venomous outpourings.

We worked as a team – an admirable team. It is only the young who can really give themselves to work of this exacting nature, scrapping one drawing to begin another, then scrapping that to begin a third, a fourth, a tenth. It is only the young who can cope with an enterprise of that magnitude, running into a thousand

million francs. Their eyes are turned to other things than the mud on the site – or the mud flying through the air.

The work is now completed, in the heart of the Homeric landscape of Marseille. We never forgot the landscape. And Nature responded. She has laid her hand upon our work.

By kicking up a shindy, they wanted to stifle the Marseille plan. A funny way to go about it! Instead of silence, a clamour arose, growing ever louder and louder in protest, then the counter-clamour in support. Now the battle has been won. By us. Already in other parts of the country the foundations of similar buildings are being laid.

People are flocking to Marseille. An average of 200 a day. Special arrangements have had to be made to cope with them. They come from all over the world.

Newspapers, magazines and technical journals send their reporters. Governments send their experts.

Mud....

It was slung at us at a meeting of the Conseil supérieur de l'architecture et de l'urbanisme de France, a society of which I was a

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# CONSEIL SUPÉRIEUR D'HYGIÈNE PUBLIQUE DE FRANCE

Séance du 11 octobre 1948

O B J E T :

UNITÉ D'HABITATION LE CORBUSIER A MARSEILLE

RAPPORTEUR

Maurice PUTEAUX, arch. D.P.L.G. membre du Conseil supérieur d'hygiène publique de France

d'en aménager s'ajoutent aux dispositions regrettables  
logement

n Vous trouvez là, réunies, toute une gamme des causes d'insalubrité pour lesquelles les directeurs départementaux de la Santé  
n et les conseils départementaux d'hygiène luttent sans trêve pour  
il aboutir à l'interdiction d'habiter. Il semblerait une gageure qu'à l'occasion d'une expérience pour laquelle on ne vous a pas consultés à l'origine, mais que l'on tend à vous imposer en vous mettant devant le fait accompli, vous, leurs conseillers, vous les découragez par une décision qui viendrait à l'encontre de leurs constants efforts.

C'est pourquoi sans revenir sur le détail du trop long rapport, nous soumettrons à la délibération

The title page and final conclusion of the document which sought to put a spoke in our wheel

member. Between us – architects, engineers, business men and myself – we had studied the project from every angle. Our arguments seemed irrefutable. We were opening a new chapter in welfare, and I awaited the spontaneous congratulations of my colleagues.

"A slum!"

That was the first word spoken. It came from the mouth of a distinguished authority, an architect of whom the nation is proud – and quite rightly.

"Interesting ideas, but they should be tried out on a smaller scale." That was another verdict (a block of flats that should know its place and toe the line!).

A report was sent to the Minister, and we received a copy. It advocated the modification of our plans. The Minister summoned us and read the report.

"What do you think of it, M. Le Corbusier?"

"I don't even consider it."

"Splendid," he answered. "From now on I propose to call the project the Unité d'Habitation Le Corbusier, and it will be referred to as such in all official documents. You are free of all restrictions and above the law. You are the judge of what you should do and you can innovate to your heart's content. You alone are responsible."

"Right, Monsieur le Ministre. But will you allow me to say that my responsibilities are already taken and it's now the turn for yours. Get ready a social group which is fit to live in the Unité d'Habitation."

He was the third Minister of Reconstruction.

It was the seventh who received – somewhat belatedly – the report of the Conseil Supérieur d'Hygiène Publique de France urging him to refuse permission to proceed with a building that violated the laws relating to Public Health.

In February 1950, when the work was practically completed, the president of the Ordre des médecins de la Seine, himself a psychiatrist, declared that such a block of flats would favour the outbreak of mental diseases because of the noise created. According to him, the people of Marseilles had nicknamed the building *The Loony Bin – La Maison de Fada*.

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**LE CORBUSIER** (1887-1965) was the most celebrated and the most controversial architect of the twentieth century. This introductory chapter from *Le Corbusier's The Marseilles Block*, London, Harvill Press, 1953 is reproduced by kind permission of the Harvill Press.